Progressive Storytelling in the Comic Book Medium

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

Mason Wolfe

Thesis Advisor

Dr. G Patterson

Ball State University

Muncie, Indiana

May 2018

Expected Date of Graduation

May 2018

Abstract

The superhero is a uniquely American creation which has persisted since its formation to the modern day. As societal expectations of storytelling have changed, so too has the comic book adapted to tell more diverse and political stories. Yet because of the tropes and norms upon which comic books are built, as well as the sensationalism which pervade the medium, progressive stories tend to struggle to reach audiences the same way classic comic book stories have. This analysis compares two attempts by comic book writers to tell similar stories of diverse, intersectional characters, using the Marvel Comics characters Dust and Ms. Marvel as parallels. With one story more successful than the other, the analysis examines which storytelling strategies succeed in telling these modern tales and which ones do not.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. G Patterson for their help on this project. Their help and understanding played an important part in the conception of this project.

Process Analysis Statement

This thesis began initially as a project for my advisor's Special Topics English course on Rhetorics of Social Justice. I had begun to read comic books earlier that semester and decided to incorporate my interest in this storytelling medium into my project at that time. What began as a passing interest evolved into an intense study of media storytelling, which then became the something I wanted to expand greatly on. The first efforts of thesis research delved into the foundational and fundamental ideas of the comic book medium, the purpose being an attempt to understand the norms and conventions of the medium in order to better understand how it functions. This research would assist in theorizing what conventions would be inherent to the medium. Following this, I searched for examples of diverse characters, or at the very least some attempts of such. I began reading over *Ms. Marvel*, which seemed to be praised for its writing and diverse characters, and after critiquing the series as a decent barometer for diversity in comic books, I searched for a series with a similar diversity focus on Muslim women and eventually discovered Dust.

The paper itself started late in the Fall semester and continued through the Spring with small changes and additions. I continued searching for added sources and areas to improve upon, and spent the Spring semester slowly tuning the thesis. This process was a satisfying application of the critical skills I learned as an English major, applying self-critique and revision to this important project the same way I would a poem or short story, which in a way could be considered the culmination of my English studies.

Progressive Storytelling in the Comic Book Medium

Comic books are a pop culture medium which have stayed in the public eye since their rise in the 1940s. Children and adults alike remain captivated by feats of bravery, superhuman strength, and quick thinking. As this medium has evolved, so too have its writers, who grew up inspired by the same comics they work on today. These graphic novels have the potential to embody the best of us and bring us hope, just as they did for kids decades ago. The greatest issue with this platform is the problematic base on which it was founded. Even as the medium has changed over the decades, comic book writers have had to maneuver through pre-existing conventions of the genre. As a result, many of today's allegedly-progressive comics do not meet modern standards and are instead hindered by the medium's exclusionary conventions.

Literature Review

Before one can understand the basis for this problematic media form, one must at least understand the history and nature of the comic book. The format originated from newspapers, which Americans in the 1920s to 1930s began reading for their sensationalism (Gabilliet 5), and this desire for sensationalism fueled the desire for comics in their evolution. What began as comic strips followed in the same vein as pulp magazines, which then became comic magazines, and the genre became solidified as publishing companies found the right niche to sell to readers (Gabilliet 15). Comics were, in this sense, built upon a foundation of sensationalism: they sold because they were fantastical, absurd or eye-catching. This, however, seems to have had unforeseen consequences.

During the development of the comic book medium came World War II. At a time where Americans were uncertain of the future of the world, comic books came as a catharsis. But the

medium began to change as its daring costumed heroes took advantage of the war situation. Heroes became spangled in patriotic colors and tried to ride on American nationalism, though only a few remained, the most notable ones being Wonder Woman and Captain America, who even retain their original patriotic color schemes (Scott 333-334). These comic books brought out patriotism and nationalism, and notably an America-centric attitude. The danger in these qualities is their potential for sprouting xenophobia as a response, and indeed they did. Many of these wartime comic books featured racialized stereotypes of American enemies, drawing on what little Americans presumed to know of their enemies; these included aristocratic Germans (and Russians, which comics tended to conflate into the same group), big-lipped and unintelligent Africans, and treacherous, "rat-like" Japanese people (Scott 327). This mode of communicating who American children ought to fear has instead simplified racist ideas down to stereotypes that match up with the one-look instant sensationalism comics were known for.

Racism maintained a subtle function within the comic book medium for years following the racist caricatures of the 1940s, which is evident in the comic book portrayal of non-white superheroes. Because sensationalism invites the reduction of character traits to externalized appearances, early paragons of ethnically diverse characters are often characterized by their race entirely, such as: Black Panther or Black Lightning (Singer 107). The result in these attempts at diversity is a cast of black heroes who are defined by their blackness—arguably becoming more racialized in their realization than intentional conception. Later versions of these characters would ride on the popularity of the Blaxploitation genre (Brown 23), which binds these black heroes to stereotypical narratives just as easily as they were bound to racial stereotypes. The reverse end of the racial foundation reflects a normalization of whiteness and a perpetuation of non-whiteness as exotic. A prime example of this is in the 50's comic series Legion of

Superheroes, which featured a diverse cast of alien superheroes from the distant future. The issue, as Singer points out, is that the alleged diversity of this cast is limited to fictitious races whose skin was made of "exotic pastel colors" (110). Perhaps even more damning is the quote from this series on their diversity: "When it comes to race, we're color-blind! Blue skin, yellow skin, green skin… we're brothers and sisters… united in the name of justice everywhere!" (cited in Singer); of the group who recites this quote, the only character whose skin color isn't mentioned is white—despite being an alien, which reveals the unmarkedness of his whiteness as being a-racial. This demonstrates the whiteness and racial bias within the writing medium, which presents whiteness as the status quo, with any diversity coming second and reduced to simplified archetypes.

This all culminates with attempts at diversity and inclusionary storytelling which fall short of the mark. These issues range from microaggressive ideas to full-blown exclusionary topics being told in place of the inclusive ideas they were intended to represent. One incredible issue stems from attempts at writing differently-abled, racially-diverse and non-normative characters by white majority authors who do not represent these minority groups. DC Comics' first major black superhero to gain his own title, Black Lightning, who was praised for his inclusivity, was in fact written and created by a white man, Tony Isabella (Singer 114). This jeopardizes the very inclusivity the comic is trying to achieve because Tony Isabella cannot accurately portray and represent the issues of the minority group his character champions, and this is only a better-case scenario. According to Brown's historical research into the character, Black Lightning was a replacement for a character called the "Black Bomber," whose character was a *white, racist war veteran* who would transform into a black superhero when stressed (24). Yes, DC Comics' first attempt at black inclusivity with a standalone comic series was, in fact, *a*

white character. Writers from the privileged majority (cis, white, male, able-bodied, heteronormative, etc.) attempting to represent minorities through their own interpretations of minority issues skew the issues themselves and thus inaccurately reflect what are meant to be representations of inclusion. Tony Isabella, however, represents the metaphorical light at the end of the tunnel. Even though his involvement makes his inclusionary stories questionable at best, the decision to use Black Lightning over Black Bomber represents a step forward in the right direction. Inclusionary stories in the medium are not impossible—but they require constant work to improve their direction.

Methods

In order to understand where many comics go wrong in misrepresenting exclusionary issues, I plan to utilize and examine two different comics, which have previously been praised by readers for their inclusivity. The goal of this study is to extrapolate what works in representing these issues in the medium and what does not, effectively creating a sort of "toolkit" for writing inclusionary stories. Examining the strategies of these two comics will also demonstrate the contrast in their usage, such as by revealing how well inclusivity fits into their stories (i.e. whether or not the inclusivity feels out of place). To achieve this, examination and analysis will be based on content, bringing up both narrative and visual elements, such as specific panels or bubbles of dialogue which may contribute (or poorly contribute) to the underlying progressive message.

The first comic I will examine is *New X-Men* Vol 1 Issue 133, due to the nature of the series' use of mutants being often interpreted as a representation of minority groups (Earnest 217), and for this specific comic's introduction of its first Muslim mutant character, Dust. This comic will be examined primarily for its depiction of Muslim women. The other comic to be

examined will be *Ms. Marvel (2014)* Issue 1. The award-winning series features a teenage, Pakistani-American Muslim hero who, among other things, defies Muslim stereotypes and has been notable for portraying Islam "in a non-stereotypical light" (J. Thomas 82). Her character is a portrayal and representation of women, Muslims, and Muslim women. The examination of this series will focus on how inclusion is worked into the story, and how progressive themes are utilized in the superhero narrative. The two comics will serve as a side-by-side comparison for similar themes and progressive ideas, revealing what techniques work and which ones do not.

Study 1: *New X-Men*

Even though this is the first appearance of Sooraya Qadir, aka Dust, she makes only a brief appearance. Despite this, Morrison wastes no time portraying multiple angles of Islam in this issue. When Sooraya first appears, she is being taken by a rogue character after collapsing. The indication is that she was part of a mutant slave ring, and that she unintentionally killed the slavers around her when they attempted to remove her burqa (Morrison). This tactic by Morrison reveals the innate power of a Muslim woman while also demonstrating that she falls in line with traditional Muslim clothing practices. Following this, Morrison has a more powerful mutant character disarm a terrorist situation aboard a plane. While Morrison attempts to show two sides of Islam, his attempts at subtlety create a negative image of one facet. While the terrorists in question are not openly Muslim, their appearance and actions may be indicative of their faith, which itself is part of the intersectionality of race and Islamophobia, whereby physical traits are indicative of religion, similar to racism (Considine 5). The result is a racialized interpretation of Islam radicalism as one of the two Islam representations in this comic, which is a problematic opposite.

The other end of this spectrum is the presentation of Sooraya Qadir. Morrison portrays her as unaware of the westernized X-Men and what they stand for, and her first self-aware appearance is when she wakes up from an unconscious state and avoids the X-Men out of fear. This is a relatable feeling: to be scared and in an unknown situation, wanting to avoid other people. The problem with this representation is that it falls in line with Islamophobic ideas that stem from orientalism and sensationalism, whereby Muslims are portrayed as barbaric and uncivilized (Considine 5). In this situation, Sooraya is depicted as a wildcard, unpredictable and exotic, who cannot even speak English. She does not even have a voice of her own, instead having Western men speak for her. All she can do is warn the X-Men over her powers with the word *tuurab*, meaning "dust" in Arabic. The view of barbarism is prevalent that in trying to defend herself, Sooraya attacked her slavers with her powers, killing them and tearing the skin from their bones, all for trying to remove her burqa (see fig. 1). Sooraya's need to be rescued also falls in line with the stereotype of the helpless Muslim woman, who is enslaved and in need of rescue, which is exactly what Sooraya's initial introduction portrays (Ahmed 499). In trying to introduce an inclusive character, Morrison has unintentionally fallen into the practice of using racialized and Islamophobic stereotypes to represent his character, instead of creating a complex character who might defy these stereotypes.

Fig. 1. The aftermath of Dust's powers, which have removed the skin from her traders; from Morrison, Grant. *New X-Men,* Vol. 1, No. 133, Marvel Comics, 2002.

Despite this aggressive, Orientalistic portrayal of Qadir's character, the superhero benefits from an underlying attribute that is unique to her fictional universe. Qadir is a mutant, a human who possesses superpowers from birth, and a person whom many non-mutant humans fear (Earnest 219; 215). This mutant element works a symbolic representation of minority individuals, as the characters face discrimination and oppression for how they differ from the majority. In Qadir's case, her being a mutant represents her minority status: as a woman, an

Arab, and a Muslim. This storytelling tool provides opportunity to represent the struggles of an oppressed Muslim woman through a typical superhero plot, providing a sort of celebration of Qadir's minority status through her status as part of the X-Men.

Study 2: *Ms. Marvel*

Within the first page of *Ms. Marvel*, Wilson wastes no time in addressing one of the defining traits of her main character: her religion. Wilson takes an interesting approach to presenting Kamala Khan's religion by using it as a springboard for considering not just Kamala's identity, but how the reader can relate to her. The first scene of the entire series is a point-of-view shot of Kamala staring at a convenience store BLT, with the second panel showing her longing for said BLT (see fig. 2).

Fig. 2. Kamala in the opening scene from Wilson, Willow G, writer. Ms. Marvel. Art by Adrian Alphona. Cover by Sara Pichelli. Colors by Ian Herring. Marvel comics, 2014. Digital.

First, this scene establishes relatability between Kamala Khan and the reader over food. While this might seem far too simple at first glance, the reality is that Wilson is using food as a way for the reader to understand and sympathize with Kamala over her religion's dietary restrictions. Despite Islam's restrictions against pork, Kamala clearly wishes she could eat meat (specifically the bacon on the BLT), and this works for Wilson in two ways. On one facet, this relates Kamala and her religion to non-Muslims over a shared interest in non-halal foods. The other, similar facet Wilson exploits is how this normalizes Islam and makes it more relatable to non-Muslim readers. She presents the reader with the fact that, although Kamala has a dietary restriction, she still has tastes that are not defined by her religion, and with the line, "[d]elicious, delicious, infidel meat," Kamala signals her own awareness to the reader via Islam-based humor (Wilson).

This first page also immediately sets up a counter to the progressive character the audience has witnessed. While Kamala fawning over the BLT establishes her as a character who defies Western stereotypes of Muslim women, behind her is a Muslim woman who meets some of these stereotypes. The character, Nakia, contrasts with Kamala as a Muslim woman who adheres willingly to dietary restrictions and to certain customs of modesty, the latter of which is evident with her use of a hijab. Within this one frame, Wilson instantly establishes that not all Muslim women are the same—that Muslim women have a complexity to them. This idea violates Western perception of the "good" and "bad" Muslim woman, which are confined to binaries with little room for complexity. Kamala Khan may appear to be a "good" Muslim, given her secular way of dressing and Islam joke, but her adherence to dietary restrictions reveals her

complexity as an individual who is not confined to this Western stereotype. Nakia, by contrast, wears a hijab, which would indicate her as the religious Muslim, or "bad Muslim" (Ahmed 498). Though this frame offers little about Nakia's character, further reading establishes her as a devoted Muslim, friend, and feminist—three qualities which do not fit with Western perceptions of religious Muslim women. Thus, Kamala and Nakia become immediate representations of complex Muslim women within the first issue—and for the main character, within the first page.

Besides being Muslim, Kamala Khan is also equal parts woman, and this is factored into her character. In her first issue, Kamala is revealed to have body issues which stems from her physical appearance (i.e. her body type) and her ethnicity, and this comes to the forefront when she obtains her superpowers. Kamala is forced into a hallucination after inhaling strange mists that have enveloped the city, and in her dream state she encounters her three superhero idols: Captain America, Iron Man, and Captain Marvel. Kamala reveals that she would want to be anyone but herself; more specifically, she would want to be more like her idol Captain Marvel, the tall, fair-skinned blonde woman. For Kamala, if she were more like Captain Marvel, she believes her life would be easier, and less complicated, without being torn between her identity as a first generation American and as the daughter of an immigrant Muslim family (Wilson).

These issues are representative of her two identities: as a young woman and a Muslim; and Wilson brings out these issues through Kamala's innate desire to be someone else—more specifically, her white, blonde-haired idol Captain Marvel, and this works on two fronts. First, as a young woman, Kamala's ideal self is skewed by the original representation of her idol, whose design is scantily-clad, well-endowed and highly sexualized (see fig. 3). This representation is what Madrid refers to as the "queen" archetype, which is a female character whose design is powerful and commanding—and meant to elicit sexual fantasies from male readers instead of

setting a positive example for young girls (33). Kamala's desire for this body is representative of the body dysmorphia and self-image issues of teenage girls, which sacrifices one's physical identity in exchange for a twisted, sexualized one that cannot be achieved. The second issue Wilson examines is Kamala's inner dissonance regarding her identity as a Muslim. Much of Kamala's disdain stems from how her white peers perceive her, which more often than not is through a demeaning, Islamophobic lens. This reveals itself when Kamala disobeys her parents to meet the expectations of her peers, which, instead of bringing her into their circle, allows them to belittle her family, with the perception that Kamala has "… seen the light and kicked the inferior brown people and their rules to the curb" (Wilson). Kamala's desire to be whiter can then be seen in her desire to be more like Captain Marvel, who is white and blonde, and who Kamala believes has an easier life because of her white privilege. By having Kamala compare herself to her idol, Wilson effectively brings out the concerns of ethnic and religious minorities living in a white, Anglo-Christian country, thus addressing both issues of the female identity and the ethnic-religious identity at the same time. This eventually culminates with the emergence of Kamala's powers, which transform her to physically resemble her idol, and while this gives Kamala exactly what she wanted, she instantly regrets the transformation and wishes she could change back (Wilson).

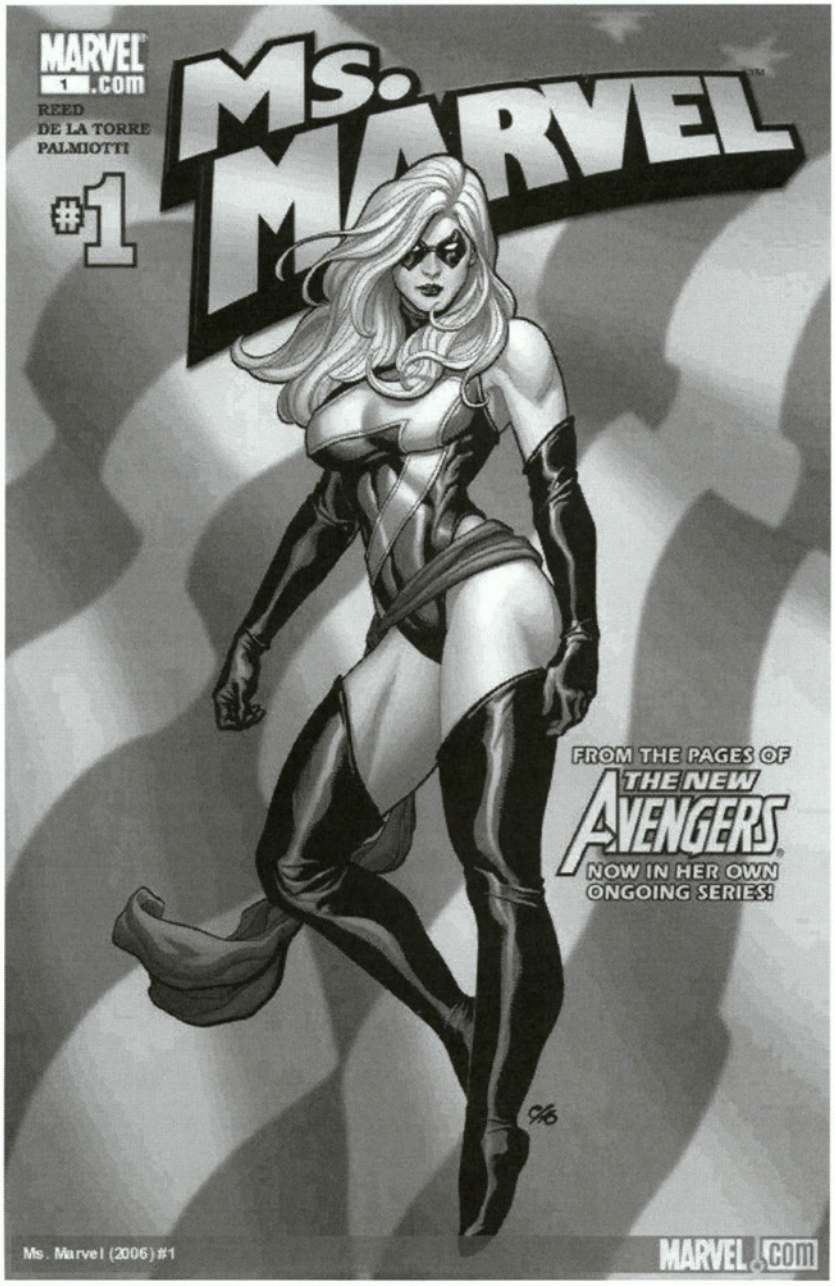

Fig. 3. Captain Marvel as her former identity Ms. Marvel, whose design Kamala references and desires to become. From Reed, Brian. "Ms. Marvel #1." *Ms. Marvel*, No. 1, Marvel Comics, 2006.

Discussion

Both comics display a focus on progressive themes and characters meant to represent Muslim women. Both attempts by the same publisher yield different results: one that works, and one that does not. It should not be a surprise, then, that *Ms. Marvel* is the comic with perhaps the best representation of Muslim women, whereas *New X-Men*'s Dust character falls short. From their successes and failures, however, can be extracted several tactics to watch out for and to implement.

The strategy that appears to work the best is normalization. When presenting a nontraditional character in an American comic book, normalization works to create a sense of normalcy of one character's physical or abstract differences relative to the culture they exist in. For Kamala Khan, normalcy is utilized so the reader may understand that although she is a Muslim, she also an American teenager with relatable hobbies; her religious and ethnic background does not and should not make her foreign and difficult to understand. The relatability sparked by normalization is what keeps an audience grounded and attached to a character, forgoing any noticeable differences and seeing the character as more like themselves. The key to normalization, it seems, is that whatever is portrayed is assumed to be the norm, which can be positive or negative. Because comic books are based on sensationalism, whatever is seen is taken at face value, which makes normalization all the more important. With Sooraya Qadir's character, however, what is normalized is her personal quandary: that the world she knows is foreign from the Western world, as is she, and as per her initial introduction, she is a helpless character who cannot control her own power.

For normalization to benefit minority characters, writers should celebrate what makes these characters unique, demonstrating that these characters' differences are aspects worth relating. In showcasing her uniqueness and how different she is from the other X-Men, writer

Grant Morrison portrays only Qadir's differences. By contrast, Wilson presents Khan in a way where the character's differences reveal her similarities. The BLT example should immediately come to mind, wherein Khan's differences from the norm (her religious activities) reveal her similarities (liking bacon, despite her diet). This method of writing contributes to the normalization process by finding a normal action or emotion in the unfamiliar, which paradoxically makes the strange seem regular and relatable.

The other end of normalization is idealism, where writers attempt to optimistically display what they believe *should be* rather than what is. While idealism is not realistic, its function is to represent what ideally should take place, and is the first step to enacting change, the imagination of which Whitlock and Bronski cite as a challenge "… to go beyond superficial reform" (125). To arrive at change, then, one must consider how to overcome the current status quo. In comparing Captain America to his sidekick Falcon, P.L. Thomas brings up the idea that idealism is the first step to enacting change and correcting problematic ideas in the genre; where the Falcon character had been based on racialized stereotypes and relegated to a sidekick role, current comics depict what an idealized version of him would be: a hero who can actually fly and meet his namesake, which brings his character more complexity than the stereotype he was founded on (140). This idea is ever present in *Ms. Marvel*, where Kamala Khan, in overcoming her own self-doubts and body issues, takes up the former mantle of her idol Captain Marvel as Ms. Marvel, this time in a costume that is an idealistic improvement on what the former sexualized Ms. Marvel design utilized (see fig. 4). The purpose of this strategy is to challenge problematic ideas with potential solutions, and this would be a potential fix for Sooraya's character, such as having her try to overcome the stereotypes on which her character is built.

Fig. 4, Kamala Khan's costume as Ms. Marvel (cf. fig. 3), from Wilson, Willow G. *Ms. Marvel,* No. 3, Marvel Comics, 2014.

The final strategy worth mentioning is authorial representation. Wilson makes the character of Kamala Khan all the more real because she herself is a Muslim woman. Such representation coming from the targeted group gives more credence to her story, as it reflects the voices of the groups she seeks to represent. The issue is when diverse characters are created and written by a non-diverse group of white writers, and this sorely shows in Sooraya Qadir. Although her creator, Grant Morrison, is a comic book veteran, when it comes to writing this Muslim woman mutant, Morrison's knowledge of the Muslim political climate sorely shows,

especially when, as mentioned before, Sooraya Qadir's character fits many of the early post-9/11 stereotypes of Muslim women. Without any authenticity to her character, Qadir comes off as a stereotype and nothing more. This is an issue in the comic book industry, with many diverse Marvel characters being written by white men (Grebey). Without any measure of authenticity, these diverse characters become stale as their writers rely on stereotypes to write them, losing the chance they could have had to be interesting and compelling characters.

The purpose of this research was not to weep about the state of the comic book industry, but rather to examine what can be improved. Though there may be underdeveloped and lackluster characters (such as Dust), their stories leave a lot to be learned for future writers to avoid. Learning from these writers' mistakes offers a wealth of knowledge for how to properly handle progressive themes in modern comics, and by extension, how to reinterpret real individuals. The biggest takeaway from this research should not be that comics are flawed, but that they are still an evolving medium with so much potential, and by sticking with the medium and pushing for more progressive stories, there may be more comics for all groups of children to enjoy.

Annotated Bibliography

Ahmed, Fauzia Erfan. "Empire, Subalternity, and Ijtihād: Two Muslim Women's Leadership Models in the Post-9/11 US." Muslim World, vol. 101, no. 3, July 2011, pp. 494-510. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1111/j.1478-1913.2011.01392.x.

This article focuses on two of the major stereotypes faced by Muslim women in the post-9/11 world. The "good" and "bad" Muslim stereotypes are two opposing binaries that reduce the complexity of Muslim women, and they tend to be prevalent ideas in many post-9/11 literature featuring Muslim women. This article provides a comparison of stereotypes against which to place both Muslim characters.

Brown, Jeffrey A. "Black superheroes, Milestone comics, and their fans". Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2001.

As a whole, this book examines the histories of black (African-American) superheroes, with a focus on superheroes from the all-black Milestone Comics publishing group. The author informs the reader about these histories while also arguing that these characters were not unwanted—they had a fanbase, but one that wouldn't be enough to keep many of these comics going. Black superheroes, while not completely absent from modern history, were few and far between, and many of these characters were forced to rely on movements such as black power and Blaxploitation to garner attention. In particular, this source provides examples of racism that permeate the comic book framework—the most important one being DC Comics' first attempt at a black superhero, which failed before it began due to the inherent racism in the character's design.

Considine, Craig. "The Racialization of Islam in the United States: Islamophobia, Hate Crimes, and "Flying while Brown"." *Religions*, vol. 8, no. 9, 2017, doi:10.3390/rel8090165.

This article focuses on the characteristics of Islamophobia in the post-9/11 American landscape, particularly with what the major perceptions of Islamophobes tend to be. The author informs of these understandings of Islam, and how these impact common perceptions of the targeted Muslims. The source provides a glance into what problematic ideas the primary research might still utilize.

Earnest, William. "Making gay sense of the x-men." www.corwin.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/17549_Chapter_11.pdf.

This article deals examines the gay undertones of marginalized and discriminated minorities found in the *X-Men* comic book series, as well as the movies. The author's purpose is to inform and persuade the reader of the minority- and gay-coding of characters within popular comics. As the author posits, the basic assumption of the *X-Men* characters breaks the mold of typical comics of the time by presenting the main characters as outcasts hated by the public for a biology they cannot control. This source provides a counterbalance for previous points, going so far as to say that comics have the potential for progressive storytelling, even if the medium is a difficult one

Gabilliet, Jean-Paul. Of comics and men: a cultural history of American comic books. Translated by Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2010.

The book is a historical reference for the birth of comic books and the history of their evolution. The author's main focus is to inform the reader of these histories. Comic books as a literary medium began as comic strips, meant to grab quick attention of newspaper

readers with sensationalist and outlandish topics. This would begin the framework for modern comic books, which even today feature bizarre but exciting stories. This source will provide an explanation of the base framework for the current status of the literary medium.

Grebey, James. "The new Iron Man is a black woman, but Marvel still has a much bigger diversity problem." Iron Man is a black woman and Marvel has diversity problems - INSIDER, INSIDER, 6 July 2016, www.thisisinsider.com/iron-man-is-a-black-woman-and-marvel-has-diversity-problems-2016-7. Accessed 24 Sept. 2017.

The online article focuses on new, diverse additions to Marvel Comics' superhero lineup. The article places focus on the continued changes made by Marvel towards diversity, as well as the perceived criticisms from fans. Many of these criticisms stem from the fact that many of these diverse characters are written by white men—when many of these characters should be represented and written by creators who can more clearly relate to them. This relates more towards the idea that even when progressive ideas make a splash in the modern comic book era, there is still a form of white, male presence dominating the creative sphere.

Madrid, Mike. The supergirls: fashion, feminism, fantasy, and the history of comic book heroines. Ashland, OR, Exterminating Angel Press, 2016.

This book is a study on the history and proliferation of female superheroes in comic books. The author has a clear position of support for female superheroes, and he attempts to inform the reader about the deeper history of these characters. Female superheroes were equally as prominent as their male counterparts, but very few gained as much

attention due to underlying forms of sexism. As a source, this book provides context for some of the sexism that prevailed through comic books and found its way into the framework itself.

Morrison, Grant. *New X-Men*, Vol. 1, No. 133, Marvel Comics, 2002.

This issue of the X-Men is the first introduction of Sooraya Qadir, aka Dust, the first Muslim woman X-Man. This issue introduces her and her powers, and explains part of her origin. The comic will provide a similar basis from which to judge *Ms. Marvel*, as they both focus on the intersectionality of Islam and women. With Dust's brief appearance, this comic demonstrates some tactics progressive writers should avoid.

Scott, Cord. "Written in Red, White, and Blue: A Comparison of Comic Book Propaganda from World War II and September 11." Journal of Popular Culture, vol. 40, no. 2, Apr. 2007, pp. 325-343. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1111/j.1540-5931.2007.00381.x.

This book examines the US-based propaganda served by comic books during the 20th century. The author's intention is to inform the reader of the political propaganda comic books have served and have continued to serve. By the start of WWI, comic books became increasingly concerned with politics, reflecting the issues of the time. Even after the end of these wars, however, the usage of comics as a political tool has not gone away, having resurfaced following the 9/11 terrorist attack. This source will provide insight into another major foundation for the current comic climate, with a basis of xenophobia and nationalism.

. Singer, Marc. "'Black Skins' and White Masks: Comic Books and the Secret of Race." African American Review, vol. 36, no. 1, 2002, pp. 107–119. JSTOR, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/2903369.

This article examines the early attempts at diversity in comic books and breaks down their possible racist implications. The author posits that early comic book attempt at diversity often involved the erasure of actual diverse types, with white superheroes being the de facto race even among alien characters. Even when black characters make a debut, they tend to rely on black stereotypes for their character models, and they are often limited down to their face as character features (e.g. **Black** Panther, **Black** Lightning). These stereotypes serve not as a call for diversity, but rather a racialized attempt at diversity *for white readers*. This article reveals the prominence of white writers taking on issues of diversity and how this has resulted in racialized stereotypes instead of real, three-dimensional characters.

Thomas, Jacob L. "The Rebirth of the Female Superhero: Kamala Khan's Ms. Marvel." The Society for the Academic Study of Social Imagery, The Image of Rebirth in Literature, Media, and Society: 2017 SASSI Conference Proceedings, 2017.

This portion of the conference proceedings focused on Marvel superheroine Ms. Marvel, a Pakistani-American Muslim teenage hero, and what made her character unique in a post-9/11 world. The author focused on the stress placed upon the character for being a three-dimensional representation of a Muslim girl born to immigrant parents, and the author compares this character to another attempt by Marvel to produce a Muslim superheroine. In particular, the article provides examples of what it takes for a racially- and religiously-diverse character like Ms. Marvel to be successful as a character in comic

books. This article is a valuable insight into a possible workaround against the xenophobic framework modern comics are built upon; in this way, to use diverse characters, the subject and principal character must fight back against stereotypes and preconceived notions through means such as normalization and avoidance of "exoticizing" these important character differences.

Thomas, P. L. "Can Superhero Comics Defeat Racism?" Teaching Comics Through Multiple Lenses: Critical Perspectives, Routledge, 2016, pp. 132–146.

This particular chapter of *Teaching Comics Through Multiple Lenses* focuses on how diversity should be used in comic books, while questioning whether or not it is possible for superheroes to rise above their racist histories. Superhero comics have always been an escapist fantasy that relies on what *should be* rather than what *is*. To this extent, combatting social injustices such as racism require a counterattack of a normalized fantasy by clearly presenting what *should be*. This article suggests one of the major modern comic strategies to combat its pre-existing framework.

Whitlock, Kay, and Michael Bronski. Considering Hate: Violence, Goodness, and Justice in American Culture and Politics. Beacon Press (MA), 2016.

This chapter from this book to be sourced from gives a potential solution to many social issues, which comes in the form of imagination. While this seems rudimentary and perhaps childish, the purpose of the article is that it takes imaginative ideas to come up with solutions, and this applies just as well to political and social issues. Without imagination, there would be no consideration for any alternative to the current status quo.

Wilson, Willow G, writer. *Ms. Marvel.* Art by Adrian Alphona. Cover by Sara Pichelli. Colors by Ian Herring. Marvel comics, 2014. Digital.

This comic book is the issue to be examined in the research paper. This is the first issue of Kamala Khan's character appearance as the new Ms. Marvel. The comic goes into her experience as a Muslim woman and a first generation American teenager, which results in a struggle between both identities while facing Islamophobia and body issues. The comic is a great example of what to look for in a progressive comic, and will be the source of many tactics.